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ABSTRACT

In view of the importance of recognizing and documenting the prior learning of adult students returning to higher education, a project was undertaken to research, construct a system, and write materials for use in assessing the experiential learning acquired by students seeking access to higher education. An extensive research effort was conducted, and a system to oversee the assessment of the prior learning of mature students was proposed. The system provides for assessment by andragogical counselors and assessors who report to a prior learning program director, who in turn reports to the program's central administration. The system does not award credits for experience as such but rather only for learning outcomes. The identification criteria developed for the program stipulate that the learning must be measurable, college level, applicable outside the specific context in which it was learned, and relatively current. Furthermore, the learning in question must have both a theoretical and applied component, serve as a base for further learning, and show some relationship to the person's degree goal. Projects are now underway in 11 colleges and various universities in Quebec, and a series of materials for use by administrators, counselors, assessors, and students is being developed. The assessment process that was proposed on the basis of the Quebec experience entails having a program director, department chairman, and jury examine a student's complete portfolio and gives students the right to appeal any decision made. (MN)

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ACCESS BY MATURE STUDENTS TO HIGHER EDUCATION
The Canadian Experience of Experiential Learning in Higher Education

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The Canadian Experience of Experiential Learning in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

Due to social changes and other circumstances of life, several adults have learned outside academic institutions valuable skills that could sometimes be linked to what is already taught in a traditional classroom. In order to avoid duplication of what they already know and are able to do, they request a proprer assessment of their competencies when returning to school. This has become one of the major issues in adult education for the future.

The recognition of prior learning by means other than equivalencies and standardized tests, has been a priority for the Quebec Ministry of Education and other ministries as well. Money was granted to do research, construct a system and write material to be used by mature students, administrators, counselors and faculty. Although institutions throughout Canada seemed to be concerned with this problem, we have not been aware so far, of any concrete experience outside of Quebec. Therefore, to speak of the Canadian experience would, at this moment, mean and according to our own expertise to give an idea of what is being done in Quebec.

STATE OF THE ART

In their everyday practice, educators meet competent people who have volunteered in projects with tremendous success, raised money in charity campaigns and others who have patented inventions that are profitable to society at large. Homemakers have given their share of time and energy to society as well as being active within the family unit.

Several of these people want their experience assessed when requesting access to higher education. This situation created various problems, and educators are left with these ever lasting questions : How can it be possible to recognize what a person has learned outside of classroom when there was no theory previously learned ? How can a housewife pretend to have learned academic skills while she was away from school ?

Equivalencies have been awarded throughout the years, but without any guarantees that the skills had been acquired. It was more or less a way to facilitate adults access to education. In other occasions, adults were requested to pass tests. It has been a belief for years that through arbitrary methods, figures and abstracts, it was possible to find out what a person knows and is able to do. Institutions have become dependent upon the magic influence of finding quick answers to assess the potential of an individual. In the case where adults did not get equivalencies or could not write the tests, they had no choice but to duplicate their learning.

This belief has been challenged in the 1970s and in the 1980s. It is now proved that individual assessment is needed for individual learning. Although some standardized tests can be helpful to verify specific types of learning (e.g. : maths, algebra, definitions of terms, etc.), they are not suitable for verifying the learning, adults acquire through the course of life. For example, communications skills, leadership skills, human relations, just to name a few, require more attention.

Over approximately 30 years, Americans have experimented with many methods of assessment. They have used tests, interviews, simulations and other methods. They found out that a standard c.v. could not be in itself a proof of evidence that a person knows everything written in the resume. These ways have not proved to be accurate when adults had various types of skills to assess. A better way had to be found, since every one of these assessment methods could not cover all the various types of skills adults may have acquired throughout their life. In addition, adults are sometimes mixed up with the variety of skills they had acquired, and they are not always sure of what they want to do with their future.

RESEARCH

In 1981, after years of enduring these frustrations, a research proposal was sent to the Quebec Ministry of Education to make

an inventory of the work done on experiential learning in U.S.A. and in other countries if possible.

The first step was a consultation with Eric Clearinghouse on Adult ard Vocational Education, Ohio. This appeared to be tremendously helpful. Enough information was provided through ERIC to be convinced there were professional means of assessing experiential learning. A visit to Educational Testing Service, Princeton, New Jersey, gave an overview of what has been done, so far, in this field.

Contacts were made with the Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning which changed its name for the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning now called the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. CAEL has produced reports on research and practice that serve as a basis for further studies. This center is located in Columbia, Maryland and gathers a good number of institutions interested in this problem.

Later on (1983), a research mission in France, showed concerns about finding accurate methods to assess prior learning. Other research missions were undertaken to the United States as well as participation to research seminars and to the General assembly of CAEL.

FINDINGS

Those trips to U.S.A. and research on experiential learning led to a better understanding of what experiential learning means exactly, and how it can be assessed properly. It cleared out some of the ambiguities that normally exist when speaking of assessing skills without jeopardizing the credibility of academic institutions.

Differentiation of terms

One of the first thing discovered, was the difference needed between supervised experiential learning (intership and stages) and the other experiential learning, meaning what adults have acquired outside academic institutions. It appeared that confusion exists in the use of the term experiential learning. The widely used expression today is Prior Learning, keeping experiential learning as the learning acquired under the supervision of a faculty.

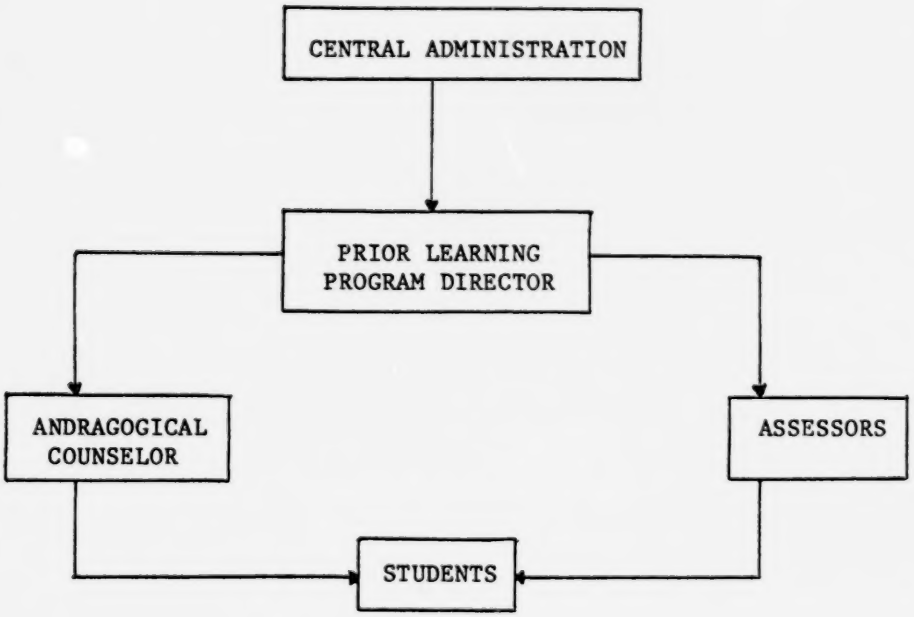
As for the terms evaluation and assessment, both being used to assess skills, it seems that assessment is the proper term to use.

Implementation of a service to recognize prior learning

The findings showed that to recognize prior learning means to create a new system with its own administration, that would

take place within the actual structure of an academic institution. Clearly speaking, to recognize prior learning means to have administrators, counselors and assessors share the practice to serve the adult population in a new way. This calls for a change in the mentality and in the beliefs that adults are less able than younger students, because they have acquired skils outside the supervision of a faculty.

The following organizational chart gives an idea of how the service works :



Individual assessment using the portfolio

In today's life, the more an adult learns, the more complex his situation is when assessing his skills. Time, places, methods of learning are different. Adults are invited to learn and take non credit courses, required by their employer or to attend seminars and workshops etc. It is difficult to assess the skills learned, and to prove that these skills are equal to what has been taught in schools.

It seems difficult to decide whether an adult has the skills relevant to particular courses, because adults through practice may lack some important theory. Often, adults say they have learned a lot of things, but they do not seem to know exactly where they stand in the academic system. This is costly for them and also for academic institutions. Adults and the institutions need to identify their skills and this is done with the help of an andragogical counselor. It is important to remember that no credits are awarded for experience as such. Credits are given for the learning outcomes only.

The American, when looking at these problems, figured that individual learning could best be assessed through an individual method, a method that could include all the others. This method called the development of a portfolio appeared to be the most accurate and has been studied for use in the Quebec education system.

The development of a portfolio is a learning process in which adults demonstrate (with proof of evidence) what they have learned

through practical experience, independent studies or other non supervised learning which is related to courses, programs or specific jobs. It is not the portfolio itself that is assessed, but the learning outcomes. This learning process results in the production of a document that may include any credit course that has not been tabulated toward a degree.

There are two major steps in the development of a portfolio. The first step is the comprehensive preparation : this refers to a collection of the portion of learning through experience that corresponds to courses and programs, and which the student will refer to the assessors. It is the time where adults collect supporting documents.

The second step is the organization of the portfolio for presentation to the assessors. This refers to a synthesis and ordering of the previous step, keeping only the elements that are related to the degree program the students want to undertake. The necessary supporting documents must be provided and accompany the request.

Since, it is a rather long and arduous process, the institutions register the mature students in a 45 hour course on portfolio. Due to the fact that adults learn a lot during that process, the majority of institutions grant the same number of credits they usually give for a 45 hour course.

The course is offered by a conselor, who could be a faculty member who has experience in teaching adults. In addition to teaching this course, the counselor helps students identify the skills, and make the connection these skills have with the existing course content.

During the course, mature students receive general information amd make comprehensive preparation of their portfolio. They review their life and work experience, identify their career and educational objectives, identify and verify their prior learning and the correspondance to credit, build their educational program, prepare a request for credit. The content of the learning gathered in the portfolio must meet criteria developed by CAEL.

CRITERIA FOR IDENTIFYING COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY-LEVEL LEARNING *

1. The learning must be measurable. Faculty members focus on knowledge and ability; they have no equitable way of measuring the value of experience itself.

2. The learning must have both a theoretical and an applied component. Many adults are strong in applied knowledge, but may lack a firm theoretical base.

3. The learning must be college level. Typically, a person may receive credit only for things that are of comparable level to what colleges and universisities teach in their classrooms.

4. The learning must be applicable outside the specific context in which it was learned and must serve as a base for further learning. The person must be able to apply the knowledge and skills in more than one setting.

5. The learning must be relatively current. A person may not expect to receive academic credit for knowledge and skills that were acquired some time ago and have been forgotten.

6. The learning must show some relationship to the person's degree goal.

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* Rydell and Irwin, Creditable Portfolio : Dimensions in Diversity, CAEL, November 1982

Once this preparation has been carefully done, students organize their portfolio for submission to assessors.

It must be understood that two semesters are normally the time dedicated for the entire process. The first semester is the preparation of the student for assessment, and the second semester is the assessment by faculty members who are experts in the teaching of the subject to be assessed. For example, skills relevant to psychology must be assessed by a faculty member who teaches psychology. Normally, the assessement is made by a jury composed of three faculty who teach in the field of the learning to be assessed. On some occasions, experts from outside may be invited when their expertise may add to the assessment. Various assessments may be used according to the nature of the learning to be assessed. For example, a student who has communication skills may be requested to demonstrate them in an interview. If the same student has written articles, published material, assessors will study the content of these documents. In the case where the student request credits in human relations because skills were acquired when helping people to cope with problems such as drugs and alcoholism, the student could be requested to make a simulation or other demonstration.

The access by mature students to higher education is made easier by following this process. First of all, adult students learn about themselves and about the school system. They get a picture of their competencies related to academic courses, see what they need to

complete their degree program. It must be understood that the recognition of prior learning is done under the condition that students will further their studies in a specific program.

The institutions know where the student fits on the academic program, money is not lost for duplication of learning, and mature students save time.

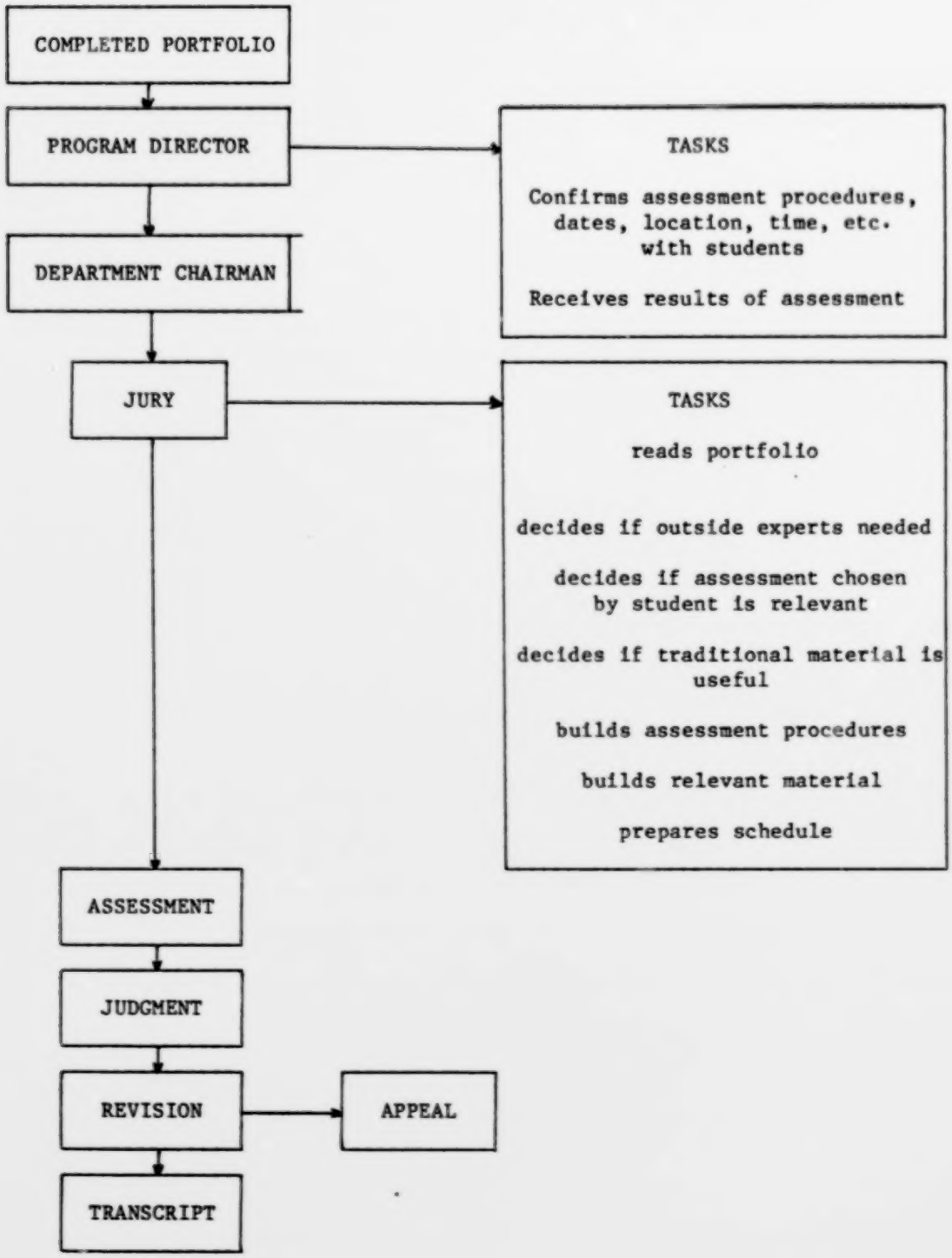
PRACTICE IN QUEBEC

Quebec has made the recognition of prior learning a major issue. Pilot projects are on the go at various universities, and in eleven colleges. Feminists groups, volunteer associations, unions, professional associations as well as the provincial and the federal governments have shown an interest.

Various research missions to United States have made us realize the necessity to produce handbooks, guides, etc. Therefore, a series of volumes has been published for administrators, counselors, assessors and students. Also published, were a course on portfolio development and a book that examined and summarized the major projects dealing with women's experiential learning in the United States. This material has been produced according to basic principles established by CAEL.

Once the portfolio has been completed by the student and verified by the counselor, it follows the following process :

SUGGESTED ASSESSMENT PROCESS



The universities in Quebec offered first, second and third cycle studies, while colleges offer pre-university and vocational education programs. The practice at both levels is still at the beginning and it has begun differently.

At the Université of Montréal, the Andragogy Department offers a 45 hour introduction credited course at master and doctorate level to adults who hold teaching, professional responsibilities, community services, unions, professional associations, etc. The majority of them attend these classes in the hope of eventually finding a position in the field of prior learning or to perfect their knowledge in this field. The assignment these students have, is to complete their own portfolios. Approximately 120 students have completed their portfolios. This course is a model for professional development). Requests are made on their part to get more courses on the recognition of prior learning, since an introductory course is far from being enough.

At University Laval, the extension department through registrar, offers a course on portfolio development to potential adult students. This course offers them the opportunity to receive some credits for skills related to courses they would normally attend. At this university, one group (14 out of 16 students) has completed its portfolio, and have had their skills assessed by a group of faculty members. The experience was a success, in that, the majority of adults had skills relevant to a program in administration. A second group of adults will follow the course on portfolio development very shortly.

University of Sherbrooke is planning a first cycle of general studies for adults who have acquired a variety of skills that could be linked to the level of a bachelor's degree without a specific specialization. This university has hosted two colloquiums on the recognition of prior learning at the university level.

Colleges in Quebec offer pre-university education and vocational education (community colleges). So far, eleven colleges have started with pilot groups to develop a portfolio to determine the skills students have and what is missing in order to further their studies. Among them, a complete experimentation has been done at École Nationale D'Aéroptechnique, Collège Edouard-Montpetit (a community college) with 70 adults who work in aircraft maintenance. Since they needed recognition for specific technical skills, there was no need for them to prepare a complete portfolio. It was decided that they prepare mini-portfolios, meaning gathering solely their technical experience.

Professional staff from a variety of colleges have attended seminars and workshops on the role they should be invited to play within their own institutions.

CONCLUSION

Access by mature students to higher education, represents a challenge that can now be met, using sound and valid methods.

The Quebec experience is still in its infancy. There is a lot to learn. Implementing a system to recognize prior learning takes time and good preparation. Although it can be envisioned as an exciting project, one must consider that time must be devoted to do it properly and professionally.

Before admitting students, a big concern appeared and this was confirmed by our American colleagues. The necessity to offer professional development to faculty and professionals. As a matter of fact, the recognition of prior learning is a new field, a sort of marriage between practice and theory, a professional assessment of a variety of learning experiences generally acquired outside academic institutions. Through professional development, administrators, counselors and faculty members find an opportunity to meet, discuss and share concerns.

To recognize adult prior learning means to undertake a variety of steps in a chronological order. It is important for any institution new in that field of education, to follow basic rules. The

tremendous benefits that come out of the experience are worth the efforts and the patience. Nevertheless, the importance of this subject is to be undedrstood if schools wish to protect their integrity while assuring the validity and reliability of accreditation.

The problem of undertaking new projects also means to overcome barriers that are often totally estranged to the project itself. The field of experiential learning has to overcome these barriers as any other project.

Basic principles : to maintain the integrity of the institution, the validity and reliability of accreditation. There are some people who believe that a written autobiography would be sufficient to get credits. This is to be rejected!

There is also another danger to consider, i.e. that the recognition of prior learning could become a political issue rather than a professional issue for obvious reasons.

In order to protect the integrity of the system and of the institution, as well as helping adults further their educational project, credits must be given only when there is a proof that learning has been acquired in relation to existing courses and programs. The assessment of these learning outcomes must be made by faculty members who are experts in the teaching of these same courses and programs.

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